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# Reframing Collaboration through the Craft of Ubuntu:

## Design Students Collaborating with Artisans

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### Abstract

There are many examples of initiatives involving design students collaborating with African artisans to produce new products, but these have generally been students from institutions outside Africa who have been ‘helicoptered’ in leaving little, if any, positive legacy from the encounter.

This paper presents an alternative case study of South African design students combining participatory design methods with craft practice as a means of equitable engagement during a weeklong workshop with local artisans.

The encounter took place in Stellenbosch, South Africa in 2014 and was one of the outcomes of the wider doctoral research that asked what role does practice play in collaboration between designers and African craft producers? Second year illustration students from the Stellenbosch Academy of Design and Photography paired with local craft artisans.

The resonance of participatory design methodology with the African notion of ubuntu, which speaks of people’s interconnectedness, is described. A localised knowledge sharing, collaborative, co-creative and experiential workshop methodology is presented as an alternative to the usual paradigm of philanthropic, top down, pedagogic, designer-led, short-term interventions. Thus returning the focus to the local, leading to socially based craft practice as a way to democratise the relationship between the students and the artisans.

## Context

*'Like we said, we were a bit nervous, but now afterwards, it's a bit like, what an experience...' (Craft of Ubuntu Workshop participant, 2013)*

The evolution of sustainable design, design for development and socially responsive design has been embraced by university design departments as providing opportunities for their students to carry out design projects in real world situations, promoting social change through design and creating 'exciting learning opportunities' (Lawson 2011). American universities in particular have established centres for such projects. Development through Empowerment, Entrepreneurship and Design (DEED) based at Parsons The New School for Design, New York aims to model more sustainable and equitable ways for artisans and designers to collaborate and has three objectives; to support artisans in emerging economies in the creation and sustaining of income-generating craft-based opportunities. To create meaningful outside-of-the-classroom learning opportunities for their students, empowering them to become agents of change. To run collaborations between the university and artisans, through on-campus courses and fieldwork programs, which are committed to horizontal pedagogical and organisational structures. Designmatters at the ArtCenter College of Design, Pasadena has also been working in this area for over a decade, engaging their students in projects that emphasise real-world educational experiences, characterised by the principles of collaboration and empathy with a human-centred and participatory approach to designing.

This established lab-type model has yet to be embraced in the United Kingdom (UK) within the area of design-craft collaborations. However UK university design departments have long carried out one-off, generally product design based projects with artisan communities in the developing world. GoGlobal was a project initiated by academics at the Royal College of Art (RCA) between 2005 and 2009, focusing on international design collaborations and academia at postgraduate level. Their principle research question was summarised as:

*What are the most effective ways in which designers from different countries can collaborate to tackle a complex regional brief of the host country, creating better and more appropriate designs than they could as individuals? And, furthermore, can the effective working methods that are derived empirically transfer effectively across both disciplines and cultures? (Baker & Hall 2009)*

GoGlobal 2009 paired dual masters students in Innovation Design Engineering from the RCA and Imperial College London with artisans in Khumasi, Ghana.

Shared Talent was a project instigated by the Centre for Sustainable Fashion Research Centre, London College of Fashion (LCF) between 2007 and 2009. The first Shared Talent project took place in Johannesburg, South Africa and was designed to bring together LCF students:

*From across diverse disciplines relating to areas within the fashion industry in order to give them direct experience of small scale manufacture of fashion products; to broaden their understanding about the sorts of things that can be made; and to connect them with producer communities. (Williams & Fletcher 2010)*

Shared Talent 2 continued this theme, taking place in both South Africa and Ghana.

Shared Talent and GoGlobal both worked with non-government organisations (NGO) to facilitate the exchange and provide a platform for selling the resulting products. GoGlobal partnered with the American-based NGO Aid to Artisans who provided local production co-ordination, national supply chain experience. They also had an e-commerce partner who established a website, [ShopAfrica53](#), to sell the products. Shared Talent 2 paired LCF students with local women's cooperatives to develop product-ready prototypes that could be offered for sale through the NGO Tabeisa's retail channel [Exclusive Roots](#).<sup>1</sup>

Both these projects produced a variety of outcomes, however, as May asks when responding to the GoGlobal Ghana project, 'for whom does an increase of international networking create value? How are the profits from collaborative design distributed amongst all partners and producers?' (cited in Adamson et al. 2011: 191). In the context of 'craft and the maker [or designer] in post-global sustainably aware society', we (designers, makers, academics and students) must consider the legacy of these projects and manage expectations accordingly. May questions the practicalities of these projects aiming to design products for western markets, rather than first capitalising on local ones. She asks whether the legacy would have been more positive if the project had 'leveraged Barker and Hall's extensive design and entrepreneurship experience to lead the collaboration amongst RCA and Ghanaian designers for products that solved problems for customers in Ghana'

(cited in Adamson et al. 2011: 190). [ShopAfrica53](#)<sup>2</sup> never sold any GoGlobal products, as none of them ever went into production (May cited in Adamson et al. 2011: 191). Similarly, Tabeisa had issues with sourcing, marketing and selling the products that evolved from Shared Talent 2 (interview with the author, 2011).

## The True Nature of Collaboration

While several studies such as those by Cabrera Viancha (2003), Ladd (2012) and Scott (2012) have highlighted the role of designers working in the developing world with craft producers, the focus has been on product development, rather than the actual process of collaboration. Murray states that 'whilst a critical framework is able to be established, there is still a lack of information that comes directly from the artisans themselves' (2010: 1) or information about the interaction between collaborators in a co-design situation (Vaajakallio 2008). A contextual review, plus extensive experience in the field, highlights that designers have not necessarily involved craft producers as co-creators/co-designers in previous engagements; the craft producers have usually been imposed on, rather than being active contributors from the start (Murray 2010), a situation that could be described as a 'superficial subcontracting of skills' (Gates, Kettle and Webb cited in Gröppel-Wegener 2010: 70).

The True Nature of Collaboration: what role does practice play in collaboration between designers and African craft producers? doctoral research examined whether it was possible to build a more sustainable, and thus successful, collaboration when the actual creative process and relationship is the focus, rather than the emphasis being on the end product. To do this, I worked with Cape Town-based ceramicist Andile Dyalvane (Imiso Ceramics) and the women crafters from Kunye over

a period of three years. Using a participatory design approach the work draws on the African philosophy of ubuntu, which speaks of people's interconnectedness and is cross-disciplinary, capitalising on the differing skills, experiences and cultures of those involved. Our working relationship closely examined the interaction that goes on in such partnerships in order to develop a different, more successful, methodology for future exchanges. It looked to determine how craft and design practices can act as tools for communication, to examine how to foster meaningful cross-cultural exchange and to develop a co-creation methodology for practice.

## The Craft of Ubuntu: an exploration of collaboration through making

The work culminated in the practice based, research exhibition [The Craft of Ubuntu: an exploration of collaboration through making](#), held at the Iziko South Africa National Gallery,<sup>3</sup> Cape Town and Central Saint Martins,<sup>4</sup> London. In the same way that the research was about process, rather than product, the exhibition became part of the process and contributed to 'an exploration of collaboration through making'. It depicted the journey, conversations, issues and outcomes that occurred through the work. Its objectives were to:

- Frame the problems, successes and consequences of the work together
- Provoke a conversation with the stakeholders working in the area of creative collaboration, listening to their experiences and gaining their feedback on the work presented
- Provide networking opportunities for Imiso and Kunye to create new collaborations
- Exhibit the artefacts that developed from the research
- Present such collaborations in a new light



Figures 1 & 2: The Craft of Ubuntu: An Exploration of Collaboration through Making exhibition, Iziko South Africa National Gallery, Cape Town, 2013

The Craft of Ubuntu exhibition was selected as a World Design Capital Cape Town 2014 official project and one of the unplanned outcomes of showing the exhibition at Iziko was being invited to show it again in Stellenbosch and work with the Stellenbosch Academy of Design and Photography.<sup>5</sup> The Craft of Ubuntu was subsequently shown at the D-Street Gallery<sup>6</sup> and at the Design Indaba Expo as part of SHIFT<sup>7</sup> and a weeklong workshop was run in parallel for second year illustration students from the Academy.



Figure 3: The Craft of Ubuntu Workshop, Stellenbosch 360

## Methodology

The aim of the workshop was to introduce the students to human-centred design and participatory design methods. The objective was for students to explore the potential of transdisciplinary collaboration with local crafters through process, rather than the usual product-centred approach. The students and crafters were encouraged not to think about solutions or try to solve something. The workshop was experiential, with both sides discovering what collaboration can bring to their own work, echoing Chamithri and Kalkreuter who believe that education can result in deeper learning when practice based work or making is involved (2013). Using practical, open-ended exercises to elicit information is an established methodology used by design practitioners such as IDEO and Elizabeth Sanders from Make Tools.

Stellenbosch 360, the town's tourist information centre, accommodated the workshop. It has a craft shop, iThemba, on site and a workshop space, which the crafters work from. The Stellenbosch 360 crafters and

Stellenbosch Academy students met for the first time at the D-Street Gallery and were given a tour of The Craft of Ubuntu exhibition from Andile and myself. Six second year students paired with six local crafters and, over the course of a week, they explored some of the design methodologies for cross-cultural collaboration developed through The True Nature of Collaboration research, illustrated in The Craft of Ubuntu exhibition.



Figure 4: Anel and Bong'i

A practice based, participatory design methodology was used to frame the open-ended, experiential workshop explorations. Participatory design grew out of Scandinavian computer systems design in the 1980s and 1990s (Sanders et al. 2011) but has since been implemented by other fields of design and ethnographic research, however there is very little recorded about it being adopted within the context of craft practice. The term 'participatory design' describes a process that directly engages all participants' involvement in design activities, both the designer and the 'user' of the design. As Simonsen and Robertson describes, participation in this context means to:

*Investigate, reflect upon, understand, establish, develop and support mutual learning processes as they unfold between participants in collective "reflection-in-action" during the design process...mutual learning through the process provides all participants with increased knowledge and understandings...the focus on practice recognises the role of everyday practical action in shaping the worlds in which we live (2013: 2).*

Collective reflection-in-action is an important part of the process of practice and draws on the established, and much cited, theories of Schön (1983) and Dewey (1934). Schön's view of the designer as a reflective practitioner has become a mainstay of participatory design practice (Bannnon & Ehn as cited in Simonsen & Robertson



2013: 46). There is an ethical strand underlying participatory design that recognises an accountability of design to the worlds it creates and the lives of those who inhabit them (Robertson & Simonsen 2013: 4) making it a fitting approach to use when researching collaborative processes, particularly ones that can often be asymmetrical in nature.

In *The Craftsman*, Sennett writes about the ancient ideal of craftsmanship as joining skill and community (2008: 51) and it is the strength of community that is reinforced in the African notion of ubuntu. Communities in southern Africa, particularly in South Africa, have a strong tradition of community participation, which is embedded in the isiXhosa proverb *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* (literally translated to mean a person is a person through other people) (Shutte 1993). The word ubuntu has a number of translations and while there have been many attempts at a single definition, the concept is a fluid one. Ubuntu speaks of people's interconnectedness and can be summarised as, I am because we are (Winschiers-Theophilus et al. 2012).

The terminology documented to describe ubuntu echoes that used to describe participatory design practices; understanding, empathy, participation, interaction, sharing, cooperation, communication, etc. all resonate with the theory of participatory design. Design that attempts to actively involve all participants in the process.



**Figure 5: Catherine and Jimmy**

The workshop exercises were experiential and open-ended from the start and followed the collaborative methodology developed by myself, Andile and Kunye. Each participant was encouraged to record the workshop in a variety of ways, using a camcorder, camera, sketchbooks and with note taking. The objectives of the first day were to establish the foundation for working together, defining collaboration and to introduce their work to each other. To understand each other and ensure effective

communication it was important for the participants to begin by building an agreement, a recorded 'contact'. It was crucial that they establish their definition of collaboration to ensure that they clearly understood each other. Using both images and text the participants worked in pairs to establish working agreements. They discussed and listed their hopes, fears and expectations for the workshop. These formed the terms of reference for their collaborative work and were referred to and reviewed throughout the week. Their recorded definitions of 'collaboration' formed the framework for working with each other. As with all the workshop exercises, the participants fed back to the group to gain their insights and feedback on their work. These inclusive critiques provided an opportunity for each person to have a voice.

*This is...* was an exercise where each participant had to introduce their partner to the group, explaining their name, practice and an interesting fact about them. This exercise encouraged each participant to put themselves in the other's shoes, building empathy and strengthening their collaborative relationship. Building on the introductory exercises, the participants had to get to know their partner better and understand the way they work. They were encouraged to observe each other's practice and to identify common threads to set a theme for their collaborative work.



**Figure 6: Frida and Jeanniel**

A visit to the Stellenbosch Modern And Contemporary Art Gallery to visit a group exhibition of contemporary South African art<sup>8</sup> elicited great insights for both the students and the crafters. For most of the crafters it was the first time they had visited a contemporary art gallery (and one admitted they were scared that they would not be allowed entry if they had visited on their own) and for the students it provided an opportunity to understand the lives of the crafters better. In the feedback session Janniel described how insightful it was to have Frida explain her experiences of being 'coloured' during apartheid through photographs from that period exhibited by one of the artists.

A day was spent with each participant observing and recording the other's practice. In context immersion is a valuable research tool and the participants were encouraged to delve deep, viewing not just what was on the surface, but understanding what was underneath too. Studying what people do, rather than what they say they do, provides a richer, more realistic view of people's lives. They were asked to consider their partner's work in the context of their life, experiences and culture and to think about the story the other person's work was telling them. The participants were asked to reflect on what they observed, make connections and visualise or mind map this to feedback to the rest of the group.



Figure 7: Lisa and Yellow

Creative play was introduced where the participants were asked to 'play' with materials, ideas and objects without a fixed objective. Gauntlett describes the notion of 'play' as a metaphor for thinking freely and without constraints, a state where one is happy to try different things knowing there is no right or wrong answer (2007: 134). This provided a relaxed atmosphere for the students and the crafters to explore each other's practice and to enjoy working together.

This was developed further with 'quick and dirty' prototyping. Prototyping towards a solution is a valuable creative tool, particularly when there are constraints such as materials and time limits. It requires taking creative leaps, leveraging the lowest resolution resources necessary to explore a concept, taking feedback and working through multiple iterations of a concept early and often. IDEO describes this as 'making to think' with rough and quick iterations of designs that help answer questions (IDEO 2009: 75). The main benefit of using the 'quick and dirty' prototyping in the context of this workshop relates to the democratising aspect of participatory design, where the asymmetrical nature of the two groups was more evenly balanced - materials were low-tech, cheap and easy to access without the need for particular expertise from either side or huge expense.



Figure 8: Zach and Simone

Regardless of their background or training, both the students and the crafters all share the process of making whatever material they use and using objects was vitally important to them as a communication tool throughout the workshop. They were encouraged to explore this as much as possible.

The object-based exercises were important in providing a dialogue between the students and crafters. Objects, whether they were materials, tools or items that the participants brought with them or made during the

exercises acted as 'mediating objects' as jeweller/ researcher Wallace describes. She believes there is the 'potential of jewellery as mediating objects to act as a metaphor, translator and facilitator of communication between people' (2007: 90) or, as in this case, between the students and the crafters.

## Findings

By focussing on the process of practice, rather than the final product, a meaningful working relationship flourished between the students and the crafters, where there was no right or wrong answer, allowing them the freedom to experiment. Products developed as an inherent part of the process, which would not have occurred if there had been the usual design brief at the start. As Doorley says 'focus on human values - let people and the insights you develop from your interactions with them inspire your work' (2012: 51).

The camcorder and camera were utilised as tools not just for documentation but also as mediating objects to engage the participants equitably in the process and strengthen their collaborative relationship. Video within ethnographic research can break down traditional hierarchies (Pink 2001: 37) and the camcorder did the same for the students and crafters throughout the workshop. It became second nature to all participants to reflect and record their collaborative work. One of the exercises used repeatedly was Pass the Camera<sup>9</sup> where each participant took it in turns to record each other's reflections, before passing it on to the next participant. Again, this reinforced the parity of exchange between the students and the crafters, eliminating the traditional roles of the observer and the observed.

One of the most remarkable outcomes was the energy and commitment to working together that both the students and the crafters brought to the workshop. They all engaged in the work and approached it seriously, with earnest exchange happening. There was not one cross word, refusal to work or lack of engagement throughout the week. As potter Jimmy said during the Pass the Camera feedback session on the last day 'another thing I discover, the, all of us, each and every partner they enjoyed themselves and they was [sic] very great smile, each and every one' (2014). Both the students and the crafters were introduced to working with someone they would not necessarily have contact with (and probably had little in common with), but who could potentially add value to their work in some way; though an introduction to new skills, knowledge, experience and from reflecting on someone else's perspective. The work was completely experiential with all participants encouraged to be open and flexible to whatever developments and insights occurred. This was a new way of working for both groups and contributed to their interest and exploration, provoking new ways of thinking. These methods established a productive working relationship and dialogue. As crafter Frida evaluated at the end of the week 'it was fun being here, I really enjoyed working with

Jeannel and our separate talents really collided, not with a bang, but with a heart' (2014).



Figure 9: Jeannel and Frida

## Conclusion

This workshop reframed collaboration between design students and crafters through the lens of design process, using participatory design methods, rather than the usual paradigm of product design development.

The open-ended, experiential nature of the workshop facilitated a productive conversation between the students and the crafters, strengthening their collaborative work. By working co-creatively they were able to draw on the notion of ubuntu with each collaborator participating equally with mutual respect and having a voice. As Sanders & Simon state 'co-creation puts tools for communication and creativity in the hands of the people who will benefit directly from the results' (2009). Facilitating the workshop in the community setting of Stellenbosch 360 outside of the classroom provided greater possibility for knowledge exchange away from the usual hierarchical structures and power relationships of a higher education setting.

Shared Talent and GoGlobal are just two of the examples of students working in cross-cultural collaborative craft and design workshop projects using a product-led methodology, rather than through process in the way The Craft of Ubuntu Workshop did. Chamithri and Kalkreuter from Heriot-Watt University in Edinburgh redress the balance somewhat with their 2013 cross-cultural craft project, Makers in the Classroom, where a mix of Scottish and Indian designer-makers worked with home economics and art and design secondary school students (2013). The conclusions that Chamithri and Kalkreuter draw from this project echo the outcomes from The Craft of Ubuntu Workshop:

*Placing the students in a real-life situation allowed them to evaluate an authentic experience and be aware of the making process. This improved students' problem-*



*solving skills, creativity and innovation...we saw that the students acquire many skills when placed in a situation which triggers curiosity and spontaneity (2013).*

These findings can be applied to both The Craft of Ubuntu Workshop students and the crafters. Anna Kruger, manager of the iTemba craft shop who works closely with the crafters, reported later that the crafters now regularly explain to her that they are 'collaborating'. She can visibly see them use their experiences from the workshop and that their confidence has grown as a result. Anna felt that she had learnt a great deal from the workshop too and planned to incorporate these experiences in her future work with the crafters.

Ann Heyns, Development Manager for Stellenbosch 360, subsequently reported that the crafters had benefitted hugely and she was pursuing ways in which the students could continue to interact with the crafters long after the workshop ended. This was echoed by Ros Stockhall, the students' tutor who was impressed with the impact that the workshop had on all involved and planned to build on this with future work, encouraging the students to continue their collaborative work with the crafters. Two of the pairings had already made plans to continue working together. Catherine arranged to take a group of friends to Jimmy's ceramics studio so that he could teach them how to throw pots. Simone and Zach had arranged for Zach to visit Stellenbosch Academy to use the printing press. They planned to develop a range of printed postcards for Zach to sell.

The Craft of Ubuntu Workshop demonstrates that a localised knowledge sharing, collaborative, co-creative and experiential workshop methodology leaves a more positive legacy for both participants, rather than the usual paradigm of top down, product design-led, short-term interventions. Thus illustrating that socially based craft practice can be a way to democratise collaboration between two disparate participant groups such as higher education design students and crafters. As Stellenbosch Academy Director Barbara Fassler said the workshop was an:

*Incredible, explorative and idea awakening experience...for our students and local crafters men and women. It was so amazing to see what transpired from the collaboration and the students have taken to heart the importance of processing their ideas and working in collaboration with different disciplines to achieve this. (Email correspondence with the author, 11<sup>th</sup> March 2014)*

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> www.exclusiveroots.com.

<sup>2</sup> The only references to ShopAfrica53 to date are online articles from 2012 about ShopAfrica53's founder, Herman Chinery-Hesse.

<sup>3</sup> 2nd to 7th December 2013.

<sup>4</sup> 14th to 21st March 2014 and 18th to 22nd June 2014.

<sup>5</sup> Established in 2002, the Academy teaches graphic design, photography, illustration and art direction.

<sup>6</sup> 21st February to 2nd March 2014.

<sup>7</sup> SHIFT was a platform for World Design Capital 2014 within the Stellenbosch region to showcase the innovative capacity and potential for Stellenbosch.

<sup>8</sup> Titled Paperwork: an exhibition of contemporary South African works on paper the show brought together more than 50 works by South African artists utilising paper in different ways across a range of various disciplines and techniques. It included historical works from the mid-1970s up until newly produced works from 2014.

<sup>9</sup> Pass the Camera is a technique developed by American filmmaker Jennifer Fox for her 2006 documentary film Flying: Confessions of a Free Woman in which she instigated dialogue with women in seventeen countries by 'passing the camera'.

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